

Illinois Issues

A publication of the University of Illinois at Springfield



Sometimes fine art,
sometimes craft,
it defies definition

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Peggy Boyer Long



The case for public support of the arts is pretty much what it was nearly seven decades ago

by Peggy Boyer Long

They adorned big city train stations, small town post offices and neighborhood schools. Some exist still, remnants of this country's hardest of hard times.

They were commissioned to portray Americans at work and at play, anonymous citizens shouldering long odds, building a nation, sometimes with little more than muscle and will. They were created by American artists, many of them anonymous, too, and staring down tough days of their own.

But these murals, many faded, most forgotten, were first and foremost the expression of a singular public vision, a recognition by the American government

state treasures survive.

But, fortunately, there is growing interest, here and elsewhere, in finding, documenting and preserving this cultural heritage. It's worth preserving. Illinois' murals, Ryan Reeves writes, "depict such intimate scenes as a grandmother sharing a letter over a picket fence or a group of hard-hatted miners walking under a dark sky" (see page 26). Other pieces show women ironing, men working for the WPA, a game of cards.

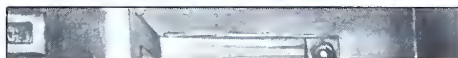
The Illinois State Museum, only one of

the institutions to do so, has been taking steps to preserve and promote its own collection of this state's WPA art, a portfolio that encompasses urban skylines and rural landscapes, the comforts of homelife and the realities of the workplace.

The state museum's collection, which was put on display through last month, shows us who we were. And who we are.

As important, individual pieces remind us of the enduring value in public art, the enduring value in public support of the arts.

The case for that support is pretty much what it was nearly seven



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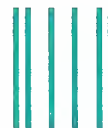
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They adorned big city train stations, small town post offices and neighborhood schools. Some exist still, remnants of this country's hardest of hard times.

They were commissioned to portray Americans at work and at play, anonymous citizens shouldering long odds, building a nation, sometimes with little more than muscle and will. They were created by American artists, many of them anonymous, too, and staring down tough days of their own.

But these murals, many faded, most forgotten, were first and foremost the expression of a singular public vision, a recognition by the American government that art is capable of knitting together a community and, by extension, a country. Art can generate jobs, foster identity, nurture a sense of place. And government support, as art historian William McDonald said, can promote "a greater awareness of art on the part of the American people, and a greater awareness of America on the part of the American artist."

In the 1930s, the federal government set about to test that very idea. Through the years of the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration hired artists to produce hundreds of thousands of paintings, lithographs and sculptures for display in public spaces.

In Illinois alone, artists created more than 500 sculptures, more than 200 murals and nearly 5,000 easel paintings.

Only a fraction of these national and

state treasures survive.

But, fortunately, there is growing interest, here and elsewhere, in finding, documenting and preserving this cultural heritage. It's worth preserving. Illinois' murals, Ryan Reeves writes, "depict such intimate scenes as a grandmother sharing a letter over a picket fence or a group of hard-hatted miners walking under a dark sky" (see page 26). Other pieces show women ironing, men working for the WPA, a game of cards.

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As important, individual pieces remind us of the enduring value in public art, the enduring value in public support of the arts.

The case for that support is pretty much what it was nearly seven decades ago: to enhance individual and community identity; to encourage diverse forms of creativity; to expand economic development.

Surely that case has been made. Art can be a good investment. Even in bad economic times. Maybe especially in bad economic times.

States and local governments are discovering that. The Center for Arts and Culture, an independent Washington, D.C.-based think tank, points out that even as federal support for the arts has been cut, overall, state and local support for the arts has increased.

According to the center's "National Investment in the Arts" report, National Endowment for the Arts funding dropped from \$176 million in 1992 to \$105 million in 2000. State spending on the arts increased in that same period



Woman Ironing, 1937. Max Kahu. From the Works Progress Administration collection at the Illinois State Museum.

Projects Editor Maureen Foertsch McKinney conceived and directed this year's annual arts issue, our seventh.

Each December, this issue turns into a labor of love. More so this year for Maureen. She guided the writers, selected the art and kept us all on track.

Finding great photographs to illustrate our stories entailed visits to the Tarble Arts Center at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston and the Illinois State Museum in Springfield. Maureen was assisted in these forays by *Illinois Issues'* energetic new graduate assistant Joseph Andrew Carrier.

I think you'll agree they both did a great job.

Thanks, as well, to staff at the Tarble and the state museum for their enthusiastic help.

local government spending jumped from \$600 million to \$800 million.

Sure, it's a risky, venture capital expense, admits Bruce Seaman, who compiled that report for the center last spring. "Artistic creation," he wrote, "like scientific research and development, generates many failures for every high profile success. Yet, while few would deny the critical role played by traditional R&D in the future growth of any economy, the arts continue to struggle to find the right formula to ensure a stable future for 'artistic R&D.'"

Scholars Joni Cherbo and Margaret Wyszomirski argue the search is well under way, that a new arts and cultural policy is being born. They've edited a collection of essays on that subject: *The Public Life of the Arts in America*. "We still grope," they write, "for ways to identify the public purposes of public art programs." But this, they argue, is as it should be.

In that sense, the states, Illinois included, may be ahead of the game at finding creative ways to fund and to further the arts. We highlight a few examples this month.

Joseph Andrew Carrier writes about

the transfer of artistic skills (see page 21). The Illinois Arts Council's master/apprentice program was designed to perpetuate the traditional crafts, including the old ways of making wooden basket traps used in commercial fishing along the Illinois River.

One strategy for increasing public support for the arts has been just this, to redefine art, to make it more inclusive. We hint at the outer borders of this debate with pieces on high art (see page 10) and outsider art (see page 13).

And we return, as we often do, to the folk arts. Even in that, the boundaries aren't clear. Dan Guillory, who explores Illinois' folk art tradition (see page 14), notes that "the term 'folk art' suggests such a diversity of forms, it defies easy definition."

We suggest asking the carvers, potters and quilters. And that brings us full circle to the original government arts program. The premise of the WPA's Federal Art Project was that the artists and the residents of the communities where those artists live and work should decide what constitutes art and what merits public support. □

Peggy Boyer Long can be reached at Peggyboy@aol.com.



Sunday on the Farm, 1936. Thorvald Hoyer. From the Works Progress Administration collection at the Illinois State Museum.

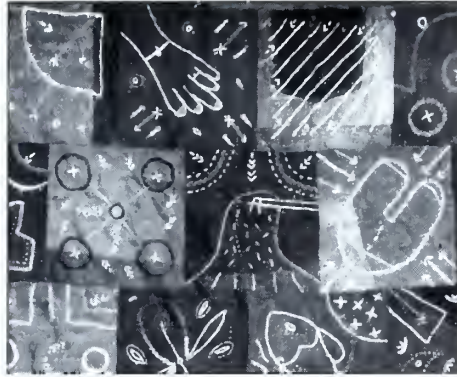


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For more than 40 years, Koko Taylor has nurtured and preserved the distinctive Chicago sound. And she's among the last to have lived what she sings.

by Aaron Chambers

Credits: The cover is a photograph of an embroidered denim quilt by Cora Meek. It comes to us courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center at Eastern Illinois University, Charleston.

Editorial and business office: HRB 10, University of Illinois at Springfield, One University Plaza, Springfield, IL 62703-5407. Telephone: 217-206-6084. Fax: 217-206-7257. E-mail: illinoisissues@uis.edu. E-mail publisher: morsch.michael@uis.edu. E-mail editor: boyer-long.peggy@uis.edu.

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STAFF

Publisher: Michael E. Morsch

Editor: Peggy Boyer Long

BUSINESS

Circulation & marketing manager: Charlene Lambert

Business manager: Chris Ryan

EDITORIAL

Statehouse bureau chief: Aaron Chambers

Projects editor: Maureen Foertsch McKinney

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Contributing editor: Rodd Whelpley

Columnists: Robert Davis

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Patrick E. Gauen

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PRODUCTION

Art director: Diana L. C. Nelson

Chambers



Artists in two rural regions of the state find value in cooperation

by Aaron Chambers

Ken Bichell certainly deserved his cold beer after taking a turn at the wood-fired kiln. He and his friends must add wood every few minutes to keep the kiln's internal temperature at the desired 2300 degrees. And they must keep this pace around the clock for three days.

"I used to run track in high school, and I was always the long distance runner," Bichell says. "That's what I like: that long haul that feels so good at the finish line. This is sort of the marathon of the pottery world."

Wood firing is primitive compared to modern gas or electric alternatives. But potters who employ the ancient method say they wouldn't have it any other way. Searing ash melts into a rich and varied glaze when it strikes clay sealed in the brick furnace. The resulting multicolored texture is unpredictable but distinguished.

Wood firing also binds people. "You have an instant involved community," says Bichell, who co-owns the kiln with three other potters. "You're sitting up at 3 in the

morning and having conversations that you wouldn't normally have because you're semi-delirious. You get to know people at different levels."

This cooperative atmosphere exists on another level. The Galena-area potters, together with other artists in the northwest corner of Illinois, are part of a larger campaign to promote their collective work and attract art-consuming visitors to the region.

They aren't the only ones to hit on this idea. A similar coordinated push is under way in the southern reaches of the state. Both efforts make artistic and

economic sense. Jo Daviess County, where Galena is located, and the southern counties of the state comprise distinct regions with their rolling hills and scenic topography. And both have long been magnets for artists.

As Marion painter Melissa Carstens puts it, "There are so many places to paint or take pictures of" in southern Illinois.

Cobden painter Lee Spalt agrees. "This region is pretty stimulating, geographically and intellectually, for creative people of all kinds. The whole area seems to be filled with people who enjoy creative things, not necessarily for commercial purposes but just for the sake of expressing themselves."

The southern region also is home to a school that has attracted and retained creative minds. Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

Still, the artistic communities in the more rural sections of northwest and southern Illinois struggle for a share of the spotlight put on their counterparts in cosmopolitan Chicago. "No matter where you are, even if you're in the



Ken Bichell and other Galena-area potters built a wood-fired kiln near East Dubuque. Photograph courtesy of Bichell's Mississippi Mud Studios.



biggest active arts center there is, you can still feel like you're not getting attention," says Lynne Warren, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. "So it's always very important for artists to organize, to take steps to promote their work."

The artists in northwest and southern Illinois are engaged in efforts to do just that: Artists, galleries, tourism and chamber groups, and other promoters are trying to heighten their respective communities' profiles.

"There have been artists here for years and years," says Stephanie O'Shaughnessy, another co-owner of the Galena-area kiln. "But over the past couple years, more artists are coming, there's more communication among the artists, and I think there is an effort to make this area of the state known for the arts."

John Mazor, executive director of the Galena/Jo Daviess County Convention and Visitors Bureau, puts that last point in marketing terms. "Our strategic initiative is to find ways to connect the traveling public to the art product. Our role is to look at the product, try to make it appealing to visitors and then connect those two bodies. We want to create an experience."

To that end, the Galena-area potters hosted in mid-October their second annual tour of pottery studios, which they call "Twenty Dirty Hands." They connected six studios on a map and distributed the map to tourists who drove to studios in Elizabeth, then west to the kiln near East Dubuque and to points in between.

Jo Daviess County, where Galena is located, and the southern counties of the state comprise distinct regions with their rolling hills and scenic topography. And both have long been magnets for artists.

They watched the potters throw clay. They could toss wood into the wood-fired kiln. They bought pottery.

At the opposite end of the state, a similar tour is called the "Art Trail of Southern Illinois." This trail, which includes points in 20 towns from Red Bud, east to Fairfield and southwest to Cairo, is considerably larger. It's also more inclusive artistically: It represents painters, sculptors, woodworkers,

calligraphers and glass blowers. Nonetheless, the goal is the same.

"One of the problems we have is connecting the dots for the arts in southern Illinois, and making people aware of how many artists we have and that they're essential," says Betty Jesse, a Creal Springs painter. "It's very hard to sell art appreciation, and I think that may be more difficult here than in a metropolitan area."

The southern Illinois trail is detailed in a brochure that, promoters point out, is in its second printing. The full-color handout includes sample pictures of art and the highlights of studios and galleries along the trail.

Spalt, the Cobden painter, says the promotional trail is useful because some artists are not inclined to market their products, and the trail does that for them. "I think some of the artists here are casting about trying to find some way to market their work."

Richard Lawson, a Carbondale

photographer who helped organize the trail, says it should initially help participating artists promote their work within the region. "It's about cross-culturization and cross-fertilization," he says. Ultimately, he hopes, the collective effort will help artists promote themselves to cities, such as St. Louis or Chicago, and other regions.

"It's a slow growth kind of thing," Lawson says. "In 10 years, then we'll see what sort of organization we need, whether we need one, whether people are coming into the region looking for us. If we have a stream in a year, maybe in 10 years we'll have a river." □

Aaron Chambers can be reached at statehousebureaur@aol.com.



This map of the Art Trail of Southern Illinois, taken from the artists' brochure, points visitors to 20 towns in that region of the state. The image is courtesy of Jay Bruce.

BRIEFLY

ARTS ACADEMY SOUGHT

School would apply methods of a famous Illinois dancer

Office of Public Affairs, SIU Edwardsville

At 93, world-renowned dancer Katherine Dunham is still working toward an achievement that would crown her illustrious career: a performing arts school based in her adopted home of East St. Louis.

She is halfway there. Last spring the Illinois House of Representatives approved a bill that would create the Katherine Dunham Academy for Performing, Visual and Cultural Arts. Likened to the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, the Dunham school would reach out statewide to students who have an aptitude for artistic expression. Employing high-caliber arts professionals, it would be open to students from prekindergarten through high school, as well as students seeking a baccalaureate degree.

At its core would be the Katherine Dunham method of teaching. Accompanied by music, primarily drums, her technique — based on isolations, the ability to move the shoulders, head, pelvis, arms or legs without moving other parts of the body — translates into a means of communication.

“Her approach to learning is holistic,” says Jeanelle Stovall, associate director of the Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities in East St. Louis. “She believes all disciplines are interrelated and that the arts feed into the learning process.”

Music can teach children the concept of counting as well as rhythm, Stovall says. For older children, foreign languages can be taught through song. Geography, literature and political science can be integrated to teach about other cultures through their songs.

Dunham’s connection to the East St.



*Katherine Dunham, front center, dances with her troupe in the movie *Stormy Weather*. The 1943 film starred Lena Horne, Bill Robinson, Fats Waller and Cab Calloway and his band.*

Louis area grew after she was named artist-in-residence at Southern Illinois University, first at Carbondale then Edwardsville. She also has taught her dance technique to gang members to positively channel their energies. Beginning last year, District 189 in East St. Louis began offering the Dunham method to more than 200 preschoolers.

“When children enjoy learning, they learn faster,” says Superintendent Nate Anderson. He says the early childhood curriculum relates dance and rhythm to such subjects as storytelling, reading and math. Next year, the first class taught with the Dunham method will enter kindergarten, though Anderson says it’s a long-range pilot program that will probably take until these students reach middle school to show measurable results. This class is a first step to realizing Dunham’s dream of an arts academy.

The fate of that dream now depends on the state Senate.

Dunham, known as one of the founders of the anthropological dance movement, has been a lifelong learner and teacher. Born in Chicago and raised in Joliet from age 7 to 17, she studied anthropology at the University of Chicago. She believed that education,

anthropology and dance were connected and studied ritual dance in the West Indies. She discovered how dance expressed community, the culture and the geography of a people. She took that knowledge and revolutionized American dance by transforming the roots of black dance into artistic choreography.

In Chicago, Dunham formed a company of black artists dedicated to African-Caribbean dances. She and her company toured throughout the world, performing more than 100 original works she choreographed. In 1941, they appeared in the Broadway musical, *Cabin in the Sky*, which Dunham staged with George Balanchine. She appeared in nine Hollywood and several foreign films over the next two decades. In perhaps the most famous of those, *Stormy Weather*, she teamed up again with Balanchine.

In 1945, she opened the Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York City, where she taught a new generation of dancers her technique. She also put into practice her ideas about learning by integrating languages, the humanities, philosophy, drama, speech and aesthetics.

Beverley Scobell

THEATER

Chicagoans try to save North Side venue

The Uptown Theatre is an architectural jewel. Mythical figures pose on decorative columns in the grand lobby. Stenciled ceilings and an eclectic mix of murals mark the way to a vast auditorium.

But this baroque palace in the heart of Chicago's North Side is in disrepair. Chunks of plaster have crumbled from ceilings and walls, leaving holes that in some instances are large enough to walk through. Plumbing is uprooted, and wiring is outdated. Dust covers everything, especially the auditorium's 4,381 chairs.

Yet in this theater, empty for more than 20 years, Carol Carlson sees an opportunity to revive the once-swinging Uptown neighborhood. Carlson is chief executive officer of the Uptown Theatre and Center for the Arts, a not-for-profit corporation that has been negotiating to buy the deteriorating structure from Cercore Properties Inc. for \$2.5 million so that it can be restored. At press time, Carlson thought the deal would be closed at the end of last month.

"It's in the middle of a neighborhood that's been blighted for years," she says. "And no matter how much people talk about restoring this neighborhood economically, as long as that theater sits there as a giant space, boarded up, it doesn't provide incentives for more economic development."

The theater, built in 1925 to accommodate movies accompanied by stage shows, once was central to a thriving entertainment district. Until Radio City Music Hall opened in 1932, the Uptown was the largest theater in the United States. It still is the sixth largest in America in terms of seating.



Mythical figures pose on decorative columns in the grand lobby of the Uptown Theatre. Stenciled ceilings and an eclectic mix of murals mark the way to a vast auditorium.

But by the 1960s, movie palaces such as the Uptown had been damaged by the popularity of television, and revenues were down. During its final years of operation, the Uptown, which was shuttered in 1981, booked rock acts that included Bruce Springsteen, the Grateful Dead and the J. Geils Band. The Aragon Ballroom, the Riviera Theater and the Green Mill jazz club, three neighboring venues built during the same era, are still open.

Carlson estimates that her group would

need to raise another \$30 million to restore the theater. With the economy in a slump, she acknowledges, that won't be easy. A previous agreement expired when the group failed to raise the money.

Still, she says she's confident that sufficient private and public funds will materialize. This drive would include such fundraising incentives as selling naming rights and leasing the theater's roof for advertisements visible to passengers in airplanes.

And Carlson emphasizes plans to build small theaters around the main auditorium. Her group wants to introduce a 300-seat proscenium

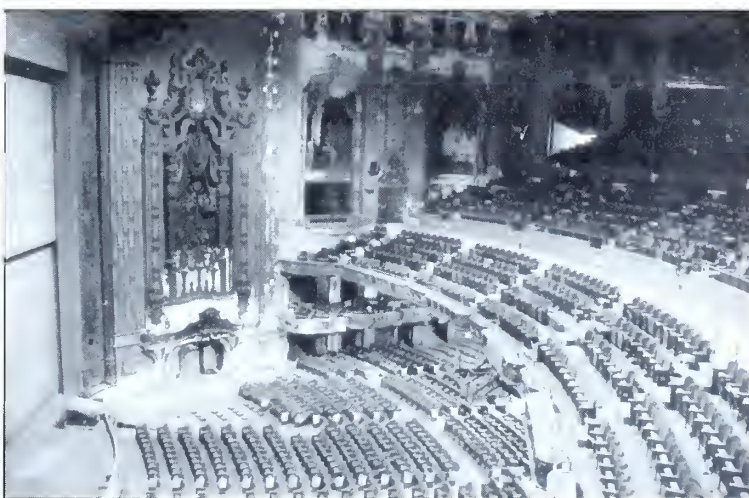
theater, a 125-seat black box theater and a 75-seat cabaret.

But Julie Burros, cultural planning director at the city Department of Cultural Affairs, says she has little confidence that Carlson's group can succeed. "They have been able to get some grants to help them, but they do not appear to be making any progress," she says. "Part of the progress has been hampered by the lack of a compelling idea for what happens inside the theater."

Michael Beyer, marketing director for the Uptown Theatre and Center for the Arts, counters that the not-for-profit plans to make the theater primarily a venue for concerts.

"We're looking for a mature audience. [We want] the type of talent that would better fit in an intimate venue, such as Broadway stars, adult contemporary, classic rock and roll, country-western, jazz, comedy acts. And we'll also feature ethnic programming."

Aaron Chambers



Built in 1925 to accommodate movies accompanied by stage shows, the theater once was central to a thriving entertainment district.

BARD BY THE LAKE

Trodding the boards at Navy Pier

Shakespeare certainly is at home in Chicago. Since the Chicago Shakespeare Theater moved three years ago to its \$24 million facility at Navy Pier, season subscriptions have more than tripled.

"No one could have imagined that Navy Pier would be the final location for what Chicago Shakespeare would become," says Criss Henderson, the theater's executive director. "But in the end it has turned out to be the most brilliant match. It makes perfect sense to have a Shakespeare theater at the center of the Midwest's most visited tourist attraction."

Since the move to the pier in 1999, subscriptions to the theater's three-play season have increased from 7,200 to 25,000 — a figure that rivals subscriptions at the city's venerable Goodman and Steppenwolf theaters. They have 25,000 and 23,500 subscribers, respectively. The theater moved from its old home in the Ruth Page Theater, a small venue housed in a dance school on the city's Near North Side.



The two-stage venue at the pier features a 510-seat main theater with three tiers of seats that wrap around a stage jutting from a proscenium. A separate black box theater has 200 seats that can be arranged in any fashion, as can the stage.

The bricks that comprise the interior wall of the main stage, which is built against a seven-story parking garage, are spaced and angled to ensure acoustical integrity. Though there's no electronic amplification, audience members could clearly hear the sound of an actor tapping a pencil on a desk during an October production of *Love's Labor's Lost*.

Henderson attributes the theater's success in large part to the high-profile location. "Back in 1986, nobody thought Chicago would support a Shakespeare theater on any sort of grand scale." That's when the theater staged its first production, *Henry V*, on the roof of a pub in the Lincoln Park neighborhood.

"While there was a decade of audience development that transpired, the opening of the facility out here just catapulted the theater onto the radar screen of the greater Chicago area. And people responded by subscribing in huge numbers."

Shakespeare may be the resident playwright at the theater on the pier, as is clear by the name on the 70-foot marquee, but the theater does produce the occasional non-Shakespearean play. "It's not all Shakespeare, all the time," Henderson says. "It's mostly Shakespeare, most of the time."

Aaron Chambers



Alaka Wali



The anthropologist and director of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change at Chicago's Field Museum led a study on "informal" arts activities — activities that fall outside the traditional realms of nonprofit and commercial art. Researchers at the museum and the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College examined 12 informal art groups in the city's metropolitan region, including a drum circle, church choir, quilting guild and painting class.

The study found that these activities help people bridge social boundaries, build such community assets as improved tolerance, and strengthen the entire arts sector by complementing the "formal" arts. The report's executive summary is online at <http://artspolicy.colum.edu/pub.html>.

Statehouse Bureau Chief Aaron Chambers spoke with Wali in her Field Museum office about the report's implications. This is an edited version of the conversation.

Q. *Art wouldn't appear to be conducive to empirical study. How did you quantify your findings?*

There were over 500 people involved in the 12 cases we studied, and we did the research over a year and a half. So we were very confident that the patterns we observed are valid patterns. In addition, we did a quantitative survey that validated the results we found.

Q. *Conventional wisdom dictates that art helps to bring people together and nurture their creative potential. Does your study simply reinforce this?*

The difference in our study is that we're not just saying that art brings people together. We're showing you how it does that. And that's the advantage of the qualitative approach. It doesn't just tell you, "Yeah, they're coming together," and leave it at that. It actually shows you how art works, how participation in the arts helps to bridge the gap. That's an important point because if you can understand how it does this, then you can foster those elements of art participation that work.

Q. *How can art stimulate community development efforts?*

The old assumption was, particularly in poor communities, that the problem was individual behavior of poor people and that poor people needed rewards and incentives to change their behavior to get out of poverty, build community.

Now people are beginning to see that another alternative approach is to understand that even in poorer communities there are significant assets. Our findings show why participation in the arts builds very specific skills, such as listening to each other, that are useful to the overall process of community building.

Q. *What are your recommendations?*

We recommend that the city of Chicago make these arts activities more visible. Give them some play. Give them the value they deserve. Don't close the subways to street musicians. Don't cut back on arts activities in the parks in favor of flower beds. There is creative potential there that the city can tap into and value. □



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BRIEFLY

STORIES FROM THE MILLS Steelworkers temper lives & legends in *The Heat*

Bill Corrigan went to work in the steel mills the morning after his 18th birthday. And why not? Three decades ago, they offered jobs at steady pay.

J.A. Orellana got a watch after a quarter century in the mills. There was no fanfare; there were no condolences. Just a pocket watch with his name on it. And 25 years to mourn.

Jose Rubio didn't even have time to scream as he fell into a cauldron of molten steel during a midnight shift at the Open Hearth. To look for any trace of him would have been futile.

These are three of the stories about life in the mills gathered in *The Heat*, a collection of vignettes and poems written by steelworkers from several mills near Gary and Baltimore. The collection was published last year by Cedar Hill Publications.

Sponsored by the Institute for Career Development in Merrillville, Ind., with an assist from steel companies and the United Steelworkers of America, this book offers a rare glimpse behind the mill gates.

It also gave steelworkers a chance to write about themselves and their co-workers. But these stories are really about pride and betrayal. They are about making choices, and taking chances for solid pay and full pensions.

"A good meal ticket," writes Orellana, "for the price of 10 years off your life."

Now, as more mills are shuttered and more jobs are lost, there are no guarantees of that.

In the 1980s, "imports, downsizing and an industry-wide corporate restructuring eliminated 350,000 steelworker jobs," writes George Becker, international president of the steelworkers' union, in the preface.

The past five years have been just as grim. About one-third of the industry

has declared bankruptcy since 1997, including such Illinois companies as Calumet Steel of Chicago Heights and Acme Metals of Riverdale (see *Illinois Issues*, September, page 31).

So these steelworkers, many of them putting in overtime, double shifts, and graveyard shifts, juggled their schedules to attend writing workshops led by poet Jimmy Santiago Baca. The results, Studs Terkel writes in a promotional blurb, are a revelation.

What they reveal is that, while the mills may be different from many workplaces, the men and women who toil in them are a microcosm of the rest of us.

"The end of the shift came," Corrigan wrote of that first day in the mills. "I jumped on the cattle car to the north clock house and I caught the No. 2 bus back to Hessville."

"Looking out the window of the bus as we crossed the ant hill, I said to myself, 'Yep, I'm just gonna stay here til I find a better job.'"

"That was 29 years ago."

Peggy Boyer Long

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Ma Beth *Kathi Wellington Dukes*

Judy Miller, we recall
down a coke oven silo she did fall.
Judy Miller, we recall
twelve years we've missed you, one and all.

Donna Stearns, it's sad to say
that same silo snuffed her breath away.
Donna Stearns, it's sad to say
didn't live to see her children play.

Jim Soda, what a shame!
fell to his death on an overboard crane.
Jim Soda, what a shame!
Number One Roll Shop's not the same.

Jim Stout, we'll always care
died for the price of a railroad flare.
Jim Stout we still do care,
still can't see those trains out there.

Ron Clarke, Ma Beth's new prey,
thrown to his death at work today.
Ron Clarke, Ma Beth's new prey,
shouldn't have had to die that way.

Ma Beth, we're keeping score.
Twenty-four lives and you'll get no more.
Ma Beth, we're keeping score
Deadly games we play no more.

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THE OUTSIDER

New books examine enigmatic Illinois artist's career

Tracing little girls out of coloring books, a recluse creates in panoramic battle scenes the beautifully surreal. The vividly colored images mirror the still surface of a bottomless pool of psychotic energy.

The art of Henry Darger is not just horrifying because of its subject matter, which depicts ambiguously gendered "girls" in a brutal war with adult oppressors. Its most disturbing attribute is its very existence. In the hundreds of pieces of visual art, the 30,000 or so pages of fiction, autobiography and observation, this man left the contents of his imagination, 65 years' worth, unabridged and uncensored.

Since the discovery of Darger's inner world shortly before his death in 1973, his reputation as an outsider artist has grown steadily. In 2000, the American Folk Art Museum purchased the complete writings and many art pieces by Henry Darger. The New York museum has recently completed a major exhibition of the work. The companion book for that exhibition, *Darger: The Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum*, by Brooke Davis Anderson, is a well-written and insightful sampler for those who want to see for themselves.

For those interested in digging deeper into Darger's artistic motivation, there's the comprehensive new analysis by art psychologist John MacGregor. *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*, a 720-page tome that one critic called a "wrist-wrecking page-turner," is the culmination of a 12-year study. MacGregor explores the implications of Darger's early childhood trauma, including the death of his mother in childbirth and abandonment by his father.

Still, after all of the exposure and analysis, Henry Darger remains a mystery. His tombstone in the All Saints Cemetery in Des Plaines reads: "Henry Darger, 1892-1973, Artist, Protector of Children."

Joseph Andrew Carrier

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The pages of any printed magazine are finite. Fortunately, that's not the case on our Web site.

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Sometimes fine art, sometimes craft, it defies definition

Essay by Dan Guillory

The workshop on the south side of Bloomington is snug, and all the surfaces are coated with a yellowish film. Shelves against the wall are strips of rosewood, hackberry, maple, walnut, sycamore, cedar and sassafras.

"If you cut the sassafras with a saw," observes Dale Evans, a central Illinois maker of old-time musical instruments, "it smells like root beer."

Evans moves quietly around the work tables, pointing out the table saw, band saw, drill press, sander, scroll saw, jointer and wood lathe, as well as dozens of hand tools, including two tiny carpenter's squares fashioned of walnut and brass. On the wall hang templates in the shape of double French curves, the blueprints for pear-shaped violins or mountain dulcimers.

"No two instruments are alike. Each one is unique," he explains, pointing to a mountain dulcimer in the final stages of construction. He's still working on the nut and the bridge, the top and

bottom ends of the fretting, critical in the production of the instrument's tone. "Fretting is an art form," he says, holding up a roll of wire, which he snips and hammers into precisely sawed lines in the neck of the instrument.

Like weaving baskets and carving duck decoys, making mountain dulcimers is an Illinois folk tradition. And the practitioners of these arts belong to small but well-defined communities of artisans. Illinois is also home to potters, including Bill Heyduck of Charleston, and quilters, such as Cora Meek of Mattoon. Like the musical instruments made by Evans, their pottery and quilting reinterprets and rejuvenates Illinois folk art, keeping it alive for another generation.

At one end of the spectrum of what has been called folk art are the traditional crafts, including chair making, basket weaving, pottery throwing, textile weaving and metal working,

skills usually passed along from a learned master to an eager apprentice. At the other end of the spectrum is so-called outsider art, the raw, unpredictable and uninhibited objects created by self-taught artists working outside the academy. This might include sculpture from scrapped auto parts or the work of Chicago painter Lee Godie, who makes her art from ball-point pen ink, glitter, feathers and bits of thread. In between these two extremes are the quilts, dolls, duck decoys and weathervanes, and the portraits or landscapes of such self-taught painters as Grandma Moses.

So folk art can be construed as something plain or decorative, functional or nonfunctional, traditional or contemporary. And because the term "folk art" suggests such a diversity of forms, it defies easy definition. Yet, as the spectrum widens, folk art becomes more influential.

What remains constant in any



Embroidered denim quilt, 1989. Cora Meek at age 100. Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Once Upon a Time, Alta McLain. Acrylic on masonite. Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Crazy quilt, circa 1900. Lydia Miller Beachy. Cotton sateen. Courtesy of the Illinois State Museum.

reckoning of folk art, however, is total commitment to craftsmanship, the artistic integrity of the finished product. The mountain dulcimer, according to Evans, is "an unforgiving instrument. If it's not built right, it will tear itself apart. You have to make it so it sounds good and stays together. It took me 10 or 15 attempts to get it right. Experience, experience, experience."

Back in his apartment in downtown Bloomington, Evans plays and displays all of the three dozen instruments that share his home, along with many of his paintings from his art school days in the late 1960s at Indiana University. Dale is a creative person, assembling an *er'hu*, a two-string Chinese fiddle, from a tin can and old violin strings. The thing produces a cello-like sound.

No surprise, Evans does programs at local schools and plays banjo in the Tater Patch String Band, enjoying such traditional folk tunes as *Soldier's Joy*, *Arkansas Traveler* and *Ragtime Ammie*. And this genial and self-effacing luthier, or maker of stringed instruments, is fulfilling presumptions about folk art. He works with natural materials, follows traditional models and helps to advance Illinois' cultural tradition in folk music and its particular instruments, including banjos and folk violins. Like the potters and quilters and woodworkers, he is clearly making a functional object, though many contemporary folk artists also are producing entirely nonfunctional pieces.

Evans began as a claw-hammer banjo player, but his first instruments were fabricated entirely from found objects, not exactly true "folk art," but certainly in tune with the nontraditional materials and forms of outsider art.

He admits a certain satisfaction in being able "to look at a pile of junk and make an instrument." Tin cans, broken musical instruments, serviceable parts of chairs, tables and other pieces of furniture can be cut, shaped and reconfigured into the unexpected form of a musical instrument. His adaptive reuse, to borrow an architectural term, of natural materials can be applied to traditional forms with surprisingly "authentic" results.

Like a proud father, he shows off a

beautiful mountain dulcimer, an instrument the size of a violin that rests flat on the knees and is plucked or strummed like a guitar. The mountain dulcimer is Scots-Irish in origin and came west by way of the Appalachians, then to Kentucky and southern Illinois. So this instrument is truly part of the state's heritage. This particular dulcimer, however, was made from a discarded butcher's block and an abandoned chest of drawers.

"It's a shame to send this stuff to a landfill," he laments. "It's my pride and joy."

Evans' forte is the larger cousin of the mountain dulcimer, the hammered dulcimer. He has made more than 260 of them, and he keeps No. 100 in his apartment. Popular in the Eastern states during the 19th century, the hammered dulcimer is a more upscale instrument, requiring more skill to play and carrying a higher price tag. He charges a reasonable \$800 for his handmade version, constructed of mahogany, redwood, walnut and hard maple. The strings are delicately struck with two little walnut hammers, though in the past folk musicians have substituted corset stays or bamboo leaf-rake tines.

Some theorists insist folk art must follow a master-apprentice pattern. And while that relationship certainly existed in the past, contemporary folk artists often are revered precisely because they fit no mold and work with complete independence — or because their "master" takes the form of a blueprint or another dulcimer. In the 21st century, as in the 19th and 20th, folk art forms are disseminated by a variety of media, including books, magazines, films and Web sites. This trend is particularly evident in the communication of popular design motifs for American quilts.

Folk artists share, in addition to commitment to craftsmanship, a singular, personal vision. Each artifact they produce, no matter how old or new, has a dramatic presence and carves out a special niche in our consciousness, like the painted wooden fish made by the late Arthur Ryan Walker of Sullivan in east central Illinois.

Like many artists, curators, potters and woodworkers, Evans balks at the

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Folk art is sometimes considered “naive” or “primitive,” something produced by a person who is unskilled, self-taught or outside the academic tradition — and there is some measure of truth in those prejudices.

term “folk art,” probably because of the possible negative connotations of that elusive concept. Folk art is sometimes considered “naive” or “primitive,” something produced by a person who is unskilled, self-taught or outside the academic tradition — and there is some measure of truth in those prejudices.

But “folk” is a highly resonant and positive word, too, as in folk music and folklore or the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. Archaeologist Robert Mazrim, curator and owner of the Sangamo Archaeological Center in central Illinois’ Elkhart, which contains a treasure trove of domestic artifacts from Illinois frontier life between 1780 and 1840, says any definition of folk art “depends on the parameters of time and place.” Those circles, he says, have been broadened. In fact, the closer we come to the present, the more visible and influential folk art becomes.

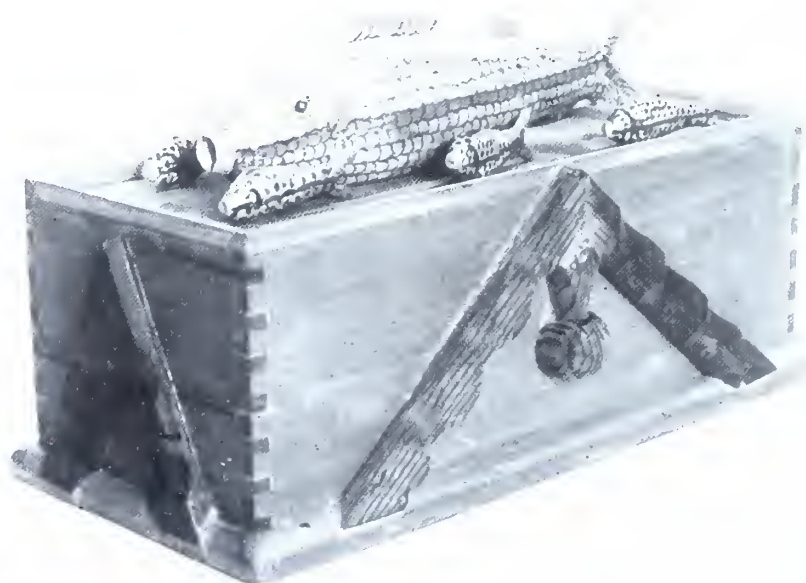
Evans concludes that he is working in the tradition of medieval luthiers. “It is an art, but I think of myself as a folk craftsman.” But his artistry is nevertheless recognized in *Tuning the Wood: Contemporary Illinois Stringed Instrument Builders*, a book about folk musical instruments that was published in 1987 by the Illinois State Museum.

This squeamishness about direct application of the term “folk art” is

plainly evident in the official language and catalog descriptions used by such state agencies as the museum, the Department of Transportation, the Illinois Arts Council and the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, which published last year a volume titled *Made in Illinois: An Artisan Gallery*, lavishly illustrating sculptural objects, textiles, jewelry and pottery. That book is a visual testament to the variety, quality and beauty of art objects currently being produced in abundance all over the state of Illinois.

One of the featured potters is Bill Heyduck, a former ceramics professor from Eastern Illinois University, who exhibits regionally and maintains a shop and studio in the east central Illinois community of Charleston. His work is regularly offered for sale at the Tarble Arts Center in Charleston and in the gift shops of the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, Chicago and Rend Lake.

Like Robert Mazrim, Heyduck immediately alludes to the historical tradition of pottery in Illinois, particularly the Kirkpatrick Family, which originally located in Vermilionville in LaSalle County in 1836, later moving to Anna and other locations in southern Illinois. The family was famous for producing whiskey bottles in the shape of pigs, some of which were incised with the map of the Illinois Central



Fish Box with Minnows, circa 1988. Arthur Ryan Walker. Carved and painted wood with mixed media. Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Floral pattern rug, 1978. Ilue Clark. Hooked wool on burlap. Courtesy of Tarble Arts Center.

Railroad and used as promotional items by the company.

Mazrim was particularly taken with Wallace Kirkpatrick, famous for his many whimsical designs, especially those depicting snakes, which earned him the nickname "Mad Potter of Illinois."

But the playfulness and directness of the Kirkpatrick designs are very much at the center of traditional understandings of folk art, which includes cigar store Indians, ship figureheads, weathervanes, boot scrapers, dolls and bird decoys, as cataloged by Jean Lipman in the classic *American Folk Art in Wood, Metal and Stone*, published in 1948.

Many of these pieces have a humorous, even quirky, quality, and Heyduck picks up on that aspect of the folk tradition in his various "cat" creations, including pitchers, jars and teapots lidded with distinctive cat heads. They have become his trademark, as he has been producing them for the past 10 years, probably under the influence of animal-shaped pottery collected during a year he spent in Mexico. He can't keep up with the demand.

"They're all useful," he insists, gleefully pouring water from a teapot with a spout shaped like the mouth of a cat.

Like Evans, Heyduck places a high premium on craftsmanship. Any defective pieces are relegated to his "mistake shelf," the graveyard of cracked pots or those with runny glazes. In his work building, his big bisque kiln has been fired exactly 180 times, according to his well-annotated log. Heyduck specializes in stoneware, which is fired at 2200 to 2400 degrees Fahrenheit, unlike earthenware pottery (terra cotta pots) that are fired at temperatures around 900 to 2100 degrees. He keeps several shelves stacked with jugs of raw materials, including talc, wood ash, dolomite and feldspar, which can be combined with cobalt, chromium and yellow ochre to produce, respectively, shiny glazes in brilliant hues of blue, green and reddish brown.

"'Craftsman' to some people means just repeating designs, but no one does that anymore," says Heyduck. In fact, his considerable body of original work eloquently demonstrates that academically trained potters can and

do participate in the folk tradition, though he has no immediate master or predecessor. Nor does he belong to a specific local tradition, like the potters of southern Ohio, who still work in a distinctive regional style. But Heyduck, like the snake potter Kirkpatrick, is an indisputable Illinois original who has made a living from his craft or art, however it is defined. He is squarely in the folk tradition. And, if a label is required, it should be neo-folk artist.

This whole question of tradition becomes especially tricky to assess in the area of quilting. Like pottery and the making of old musical instruments, quilting seems to progress in a continuous line from the recognizable patterns of 19th century quilts to the thematic and art quilts of the present day, which may be abstract expressionist creations in stitched cloth or eloquent pleas for victims of AIDS or family abuse.

Quilting, especially that of such small communities as the Shakers, the Amish and the Mennonites, would seem, at first glance, to depend on a tradition and a master-apprentice

mode of learning. Yet all American quilters participated in a stylistic discourse that depended on such common patterns and designs as Tumbling Blocks, Wedding Ring, Sunburst, Starburst, Nine Patch, Pinwheel, Hourglass and Diamond in the Square. Several thousand of these patterns have been identified, and the historical truth is that they were popularized by magazines and newspapers as much as they were by individual quilters.

So an Amish quilter in Pennsylvania might secure a copy of the Nine Patch pattern independently of her cousins, say, in Indiana and Illinois who were making similar quilts. There is no such thing as an Amish quilt per se, though there certainly are Amish-produced quilts.

The quilt is a perfect example of the democratic spreading of an artistic style through mass media. Even the cotton batting used by quilters was commercially available as early as the 1840s, around the time the frontier period ended in Illinois. So to find a folk quilt, one must look deep into the historical record — or seek signs of originality outside the media-driven patterns.

The decorative arts department at the Illinois State Museum contains three quilts that meet these criteria handily. Sally Kincaid Mitchell's scrap wool quilt of orange and brown dominant tones with blue striping and plaids was a unique creation that appeared around the time the Illinois frontier ceased to be. Cotton appliqué quilts such as the ones produced by Elizabeth Sutherland Jones (leaf and berry design) and Katherine Schlesinger Kaiser (tulip vase design) are utterly original products that, like all works of art, proceed from a personal vision. These quilts are true folk art while the other popular pattern quilts could be considered "folk objects," borrowing the nomenclature Mazrim uses to distinguish the various types of early Illinois pottery.

Another indisputable folk art quilt is the denim scrap quilt by Cora Meek, which is housed in the Tarble Arts Center. This highly expressive design, with its white outlines of fish, leaves

and gingerbread men seems strangely modern, like a surrealist production of Dali or Miro. It has a style all its own. As Michael Watts, director of Tarble, has observed, "There's a truth and directness to folk art, and you don't want to see that lost."

The influence of folk art on other contemporary styles is now an issue because examples of folk art, "naive art," or outsider art are on display at such museums as Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outside Art in Chicago, the subject of a recent Associated Press story. And we now have the paradox of young artists at the Art Institute of Chicago painting academic imitations of outsider art, just as Lisa Mahar's nontraditional painted chairs are featured in the *Made in Illinois* volume.

The lines are harder to draw, and the boundaries are more easily broken. The Illinois Arts Council has solved the problem of defining folk art by linking it to ethnic and community-based art, then awarding grant money on that basis. No matter how we define it, folk art is important to Illinois because it is a direct link to our frontier past and a telling clue to the shape of our future.

In some ways, folk art is in the same position today as was that raw form of pop music called "grunge rock" in the early 1990s when it was discovered and co-opted by the mainstream recording studios. Young, plaid-shirted bands such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana could hardly deserve claim "alternative" status once they made the Top 40 charts. Will folk art suffer a similar fate and be swallowed up by galleries, entrepreneurs and the arts network in general? After all, folk art designs are already popping up on posters and even on the cover of *Time* magazine. And the currently popular film *White Oleander* ends with a scene of an "outsider" artist recreating her life through a series of suitcases

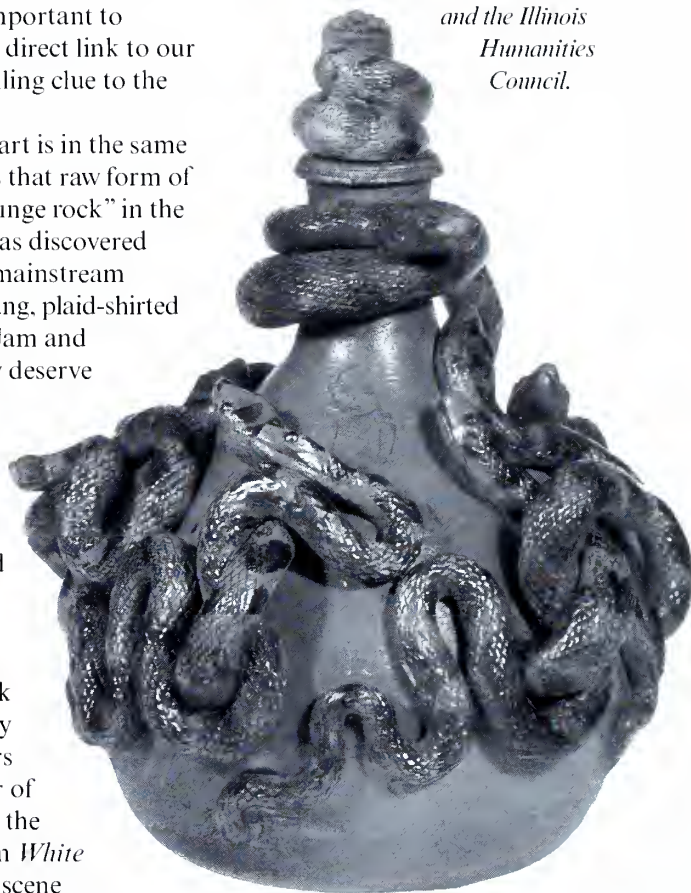
filled with such symbolic objects as human hair, clothing and religious icons.

Is it possible that we have begun a new era in art, one that will be completely driven from the bottom up? That is, will folk art become the pre-eminent art form of the 21st century, utterly dominating and possibly eradicating the beaux arts or "fine arts" tradition? This general cultural theory called Post-modernism certainly suggests that a movement toward openness and acceptance of diversity is the direction of the future.

If the Intuit museum and SOFA, the International Exposition of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art, which also claims Chicago as its venue, are reliable indicators of the future, then folk art, in one of its several guises, is undoubtedly here to stay.

And, in the end, folk art may not have a future because it may be *the* future. □

Dan Guillory is chair of the English Department at Millikin University in Decatur and author of Living with Lincoln: Life and Art in the Heartland. He has served on the Illinois Arts Council and the Illinois Humanities Council.



Jug, 1877. Wallace Kirkpatrick. Salt glazed stoneware. Courtesy of the Illinois State Museum.

Tradition keepers

Public programs aim to perpetuate skills
that once were passed from generation to generation

Stories and photograph by Joseph Andrew Carrier

Rock Island's neighborhood storyteller

The urgency and tenor of Shellie Moore Guy's voice are instinctive. Storytelling is a tradition in African-American culture, and Guy is an archivist, a walking repository of her community's history, of the folk tales and poetry that weave a vibrant thread through America's rich tapestry.

"There was a time when I didn't really trust my voice or believe that anyone would want to hear what I had to say," she says.

But now, as a poet, storyteller, community activist, talk show host and concert promoter, Guy has a strong voice in the Quad Cities, which she uses to preserve the voices of others.

She's not alone in this. Witness preservation programs sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council. The master/apprentice grants, for example, aim to maintain creative traditions that once were passed from generation to generation.

And archival collections, such as the one at the Eastern Illinois University's Tarble Arts Center in Charleston, are undertaking a regional inventory of folk art traditions. The Charleston collection highlights the southeastern part of the state. Many of the premier folk art figures from that area have died in recent years, says Michael Watts, director of the Tarble, so that

Witness the number of preservation programs sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council.

effort will be invaluable.

Meanwhile, in her northwestern region of the state, Guy has been active in the effort to present and preserve traditional art forms. She and others from the community-based Homefolks Communications organized the Jazz and Blues Restoration Project, part of a large-scale effort of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council to protect and perpetuate folk arts along the state's western edge. The public-funded Mississippi Valley River Project focuses on the history of the people who call that region home.

To that end, Guy put on recent workshops at two Quad Cities elementary schools, taking along two jazz greats who hail from the area: saxophonist Franz Jackson and band-leader/pianist Bill Bell. Guy warmed up the crowd before each performance with an audience participation chanting exercise. Dividing the students into

groups, she had them chant in polyrhythmic progressions, creating from the seemingly conflicting individual parts a unified whole. She used the technique not only to teach the children how jazz musicians use a variety of rhythms simultaneously to create their music, but as an example of the way diverse elements within a community can complement one another through their differences.

Guy also hosts a weekly public radio show, *Ebony Expressions*, offering exposure to "heroes and she-roles" in her community. The show can be heard on 105.5 KALA-FM, a broadcast service of St. Ambrose University.

"People have power when their voices are heard, and everyone has a voice and a skill to bring to the table."

Guy has a voice and skill to bring to the table, too. Her poetry initially provided an outlet for the frustrations, fears and dreams of a young mother of four living in urban poverty. She wrote as a means to her own healing. But members of Guy's tenant association in Rock Island approached her to speak for them. She says she was apprehensive at first, but it soon became apparent that she had a talent for organizing and inspiring those around her.

What's more, Guy realized that the struggles and anxieties she had been pouring into her poetry were the same as those faced by the members of the community at large.

"That really unlocked the door, and

Shellie Moore Guy's public presentations soon began to evolve into a mixture of song chant, verse and story, and she began to draw upon the rich tradition of her African-American ancestors.

Finding folk art in Illinois

Here are a few of the museums that display Illinois folk art:

Chicago Historical Society
Clark Street at North Avenue
Chicago
(312) 266-2077
www.chicagohistory.org

The Illinois State Museum
502 S. Spring St., Springfield
(217) 782-7387
www.museum.state.il.us

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art
756 N. Milwaukee, Chicago
(312) 243-9088
outsider.art.org

The Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences
1125 W. Lake Ave., Peoria
(309) 686-7000
www.lakeview-museum.org

The Spurlock Museum
600 S. Gregory, Urbana
(217) 333-2360
www.spurlock.uiuc.edu

Tarble Arts Center
South Ninth at Cleveland,
Charleston
(217) 581-2787
www.ehu.edu/~tarble

I became high with the act of sitting down with pen and paper and writing poetry about the things that were going on around me, from city politics to women's issues like domestic violence, to things like love and where I sit within the world. Poetry became a vehicle to allow others to have some insight into what you are thinking, and another way to frame what it is you want, what it is you need."

In her poem *Coming Home*, Guy relates the process of self-discovery that gave her a strong voice and a clear sense of place in the world and within her community:

*In our lives there comes a time
and a space when we know
where we come from*

*when the words and the rhythm
come together
the roads and signs merge
and we become one
with our roots...*

Her public presentations soon began to evolve into a mixture of song chant, verse and story, and she began to draw upon the rich tradition of her African-American ancestors.

She speaks about her great-great grandfather Charlie Wilson, a runaway slave from Kentucky who joined the Union army and served by guarding prisoners of war at the Rock Island arsenal. In a performance titled *Harriet*, Guy presents Harriet Tubman, celebrated for her efforts on the Underground Railroad, as a person with a family that loved her.

She says the stories of her ancestors inspire her to "not only survive, but to thrive" in adverse conditions. "We see that it is important to live our lives as if we are living for the betterment of the next generation." Whether talking about the heroism of her own family or examples from black history, Guy preserves the folklore tradition by making it relevant to her audience.

For Guy, understanding history through art is a way to create change. "At one point Harriet Tubman said to herself, 'I am going to be free or I am going to die, one or the other.' Look at the lessons in that for a victim of domestic violence." □



Versailles' fish basket maker

Anyone who wants to hear a fish story can just ask Earl Edlin. Pointing to a wizened brow, he smiles. "I'll tell you a lot of stories, buddy. I've got 83 years of them right in here." He's earnest, but his grin is infectious and, when he gets going, his eyes dance. "I was born in the year nineteen hundred and nineteen. I've lived on the Illinois River all of my life, and I raised all my children and sent them to school by fishin'."

When Edlin, who lives near Versailles in Brown County, speaks of fishing, he isn't talking about wetting a line with a couple of buddies. He's talking about commercial river fishing, a grueling, year-round occupation. Many along the river once made a livelihood fishing, but the Illinois has changed, and the fishing has declined. Yet, some still practice the old ways with wooden basket traps, making each by hand in a tradition that goes back generations.

Perpetuating that tradition is one of the goals of the Ethnic and Folk Arts Master/Apprentice program of the Illinois Arts Council, and Edlin has found an enthusiastic pupil in Jeff Barnett of Mount Sterling. Through the program, Edlin and Barnett were recipients of grants worth \$2,000 and \$1,000, respectively.

For Barnett, the opportunity to learn the craft represented a chance to recapture a piece of a family legacy. His grandfather and great-grandfather were commercial fishermen on the Illinois. But after his father chose a different path, the chain of knowledge was broken. Still, growing up hearing those old fish stories at family gatherings, Barnett had been anxious to learn the art himself. When Edlin offered to teach him basketry, he jumped at the chance.

For Edlin, making wooden basket traps begins in the timber. He seeks out a white or bur oak, sassafras, or white ash, and has the log quarter-sawn at a mill. This is important because the wood will be steamed and bent around a form, and if the wood isn't sawn across the grain, it will split. After the wood is prepared, the basket is constructed piece by piece with handmade tools and a craftsman's eye.

"There's a lot of equipment involved in making fish baskets," Edlin says, his hands working the air. "We've got to make a vat, about seven feet long and about 16 inches deep. And we have a propane burner back from each end of it, and we put that about half full of water. We cut slats out on a table saw about an inch and a half wide and a quarter of an inch thick. Then we put them in this tub of water and we cover them up with an old rug. That steams them and cuts down the tendency in them, you see."

"Then we get a 16-inch piece of pipe." The metal pipe, as Edlin explains, is used as a form. "We cut the slats and shave them down so when they come together they'll be flush. There won't be any big rise there, you know what I mean?"

Barnett brings in a completed six-foot-long basket. The most remarkable thing is the deep, rich color of the wood. The baskets spend a lot of time on the river bottom in the mud, and they take on a rich, dark hue. The second thing is the craftsmanship. Other than the rough millwork on the slats, the entire basket is handmade. Like the hand-planed feather joints on the hand-bent hoops and binders, every piece has a rustic, unfinished quality.

Even the tools are constructed by the basket makers, from the shaving horse used to hold the fingers while they are feathered, to the froe knife used to split them from the log. "Where are you going to get a froe knife?" asks Barnett. "You can't buy one. I had to make it."

The springy fingers on the inside of the trap allow fish in, but keep them there. These parts are split out



Earl Edlin (left) found an enthusiastic pupil in Jeff Barnett. Through the master/apprentice program of the Illinois Arts Council, they received grants that enabled Edlin to teach Barnett the old ways of making the wooden basket traps used in commercial fishing along the Illinois River.

with the froe knife from the outer ring of the white ash, and, according to Barnett, this is what really sets handmade baskets apart from mass-produced models. "You can buy these from the store, but they aren't as good. The fingers aren't planed and aren't as springy."

Will the tradition end with Barnett? Smiling, he says his son is learning the craft. □

A regional sensibility

Museums are preserving a vision of Illinois' folk culture

They are a dwindling breed, the traditional folk artists. The self-taught or apprentice-trained. The geographically isolated. Artists whose work is more representative of a regional sensibility than a sense of reality.

Creative Illinoisans — painters, potters, quilters and carvers — have produced whimsical works for centuries, as the folk arts collection at the Illinois State Museum demonstrates. Yet, folk wasn't recognized as a field of art until the 1920s. So museums that are preserving folk art have had to play catch-up collecting and cataloging Illinois' works. And it's important that they do.

As the ephemeral definition of folk art spreads to include contemporary forms, traditional folk arts are not a part of everyday life as they once were, notes that museum. In the Internet age, fewer folks quilt and carve.

And, even at the Tarble Arts Center in Charleston, where most of the works housed were produced since 1950, few of these regional folk artists survive. The Tarble at Eastern Illinois University allowed *Illinois Issues* to feature several of the pieces in its 500-piece folk arts collection, which focuses on the east central and southeastern part of the state. Samples, including the quirky quilts of Cora Meek and the creative carvings of Ferd Metten and Arthur Walker, appear on the next few pages and in our cover story. The Illinois State Museum and the Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences in Peoria also provided art for this issue.

The Editors



General Store, Ferd Metten. Carved and painted with mixed media. "When you look at his figures and the gestures and the facial expressions and the interrelationship between these people, it's obvious he is a natural artist," says Tarble Director Michael Watts of Metten's work. "He had the ability to express human emotions and gestures and feelings through the carvings." Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Railsplitting Abe, Leonard Norman. Carved and painted with mixed media. Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Barney Ford, circa 1960. Roberta Bell. Porcelain, fabric and mixed media. From the Famous Black American Doll Collection at the Tarble Arts Center. The artist, a former Chicago teacher who died in 1991, created dolls of African Americans from colonial times on as learning tools.



Moose Call, circa 1983. Homer Settemeyer. Carved walnut. Courtesy of the Tarble Arts Center.



Illinois River decoys, mallard drake and hen, circa 1945. Charles Perdw. Wood and paint. Courtesy of the Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences, Peoria.

Restoration project

Art restored hope during the Great Depression.
Now Illinoisans are working to restore interest in that art

by Ryan Reeves

Art courtesy of the Illinois State Museum

For many, a trip to the post office might seem utilitarian. Mary Thompson sees it otherwise. She uses such visits to renew interest in an artistic expression now almost forgotten.

This art is still visible in some Illinois post offices, a vivid reminder of the Great Depression when the Roosevelt Administration offered employment opportunities to approximately 8 million people through the Works Progress Administration. What many

have forgotten, or perhaps never knew, is that many of those jobs were given to artists.

Through four programs — the largest was the Federal Art Project — artists were hired to portray what came to be known as “the American Scene.” The idea was to promote what art historian William McDonald calls “a greater awareness of art on the part of the American people, and a greater awareness of America on the part of the

American artist.”

Now, Mary Thompson’s avocation is gaining an increasing number of adherents. The Illinois State Museum, too, is seeking to promote this long-past bit of the state’s history. In fact, the museum just wrapped up a traveling exhibit of its Federal Art Project holdings and has begun boosting online access to these artistic treasures. At the same time, the University Museum at Southern Illinois University in



Give, 1940. Joseph Vavak. Lithograph on paper.



Sweat Shop, 1935. Boris Gorelick. Lithograph on paper.



Noon Game, 1937. Dan Rico. Wood engraving on paper.

The murals depict such intimate scenes as a grandmother sharing a letter over a picket fence or a group of hard-hatted miners walking under a dark sky.

Carbondale has restored its collection of eight dioramas by WPA artists and moved them last month to a more prominent location.

Since 1992, Thompson, a retired elementary schoolteacher from the east central Illinois community of Westfield, has been documenting art — murals, reliefs and freestanding sculptures — that was produced for post offices under the auspices of the U.S. Treasury Department between 1934 and 1943. In her free time, Thompson tours Illinois and surrounding states to gather information and give lectures on the last of the post offices that still display these works.

The murals depict such intimate

art enthusiasts and scholars to collect, restore and share works from that period in Illinois' history. Conducting painstaking research and garnering public awareness, they agree, may be the only way to preserve an idea that is nearly 70 years old. The federal programs aspired to, as one Illinois curator puts it, make art a way of life.

That hope, however, was nearly forgotten after the outbreak of World War II and the termination of the remaining federal art programs in 1943. The demise of the Works Progress Administration was swift and reckless. The Illinois program alone had lost much of its personnel by 1942, write George Mavigliano and Richard Lawson in their book *The*

Federal Art Project in Illinois. The remaining artists had lost much of the "enthusiasm and commitment that prevailed for many years." They found it easier to pursue work in the private sector and did so.

More disturbing, records from the more productive years were discarded. And historians have called the handling of the remaining artwork indefensible. No inventory was kept of those that had no sponsors. The pieces were to be destroyed to avoid

their exploitation in the private market. The project went so far as to enact what was called "canvas liquidation" in the final days. Nonetheless, pieces ended up in the hands of private dealers throughout the country.

The surviving works that are now in the state museum's holdings and in such galleries as the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago were either donated by sponsors or had been saved from destruction by dealers. The state museum has somewhere in the

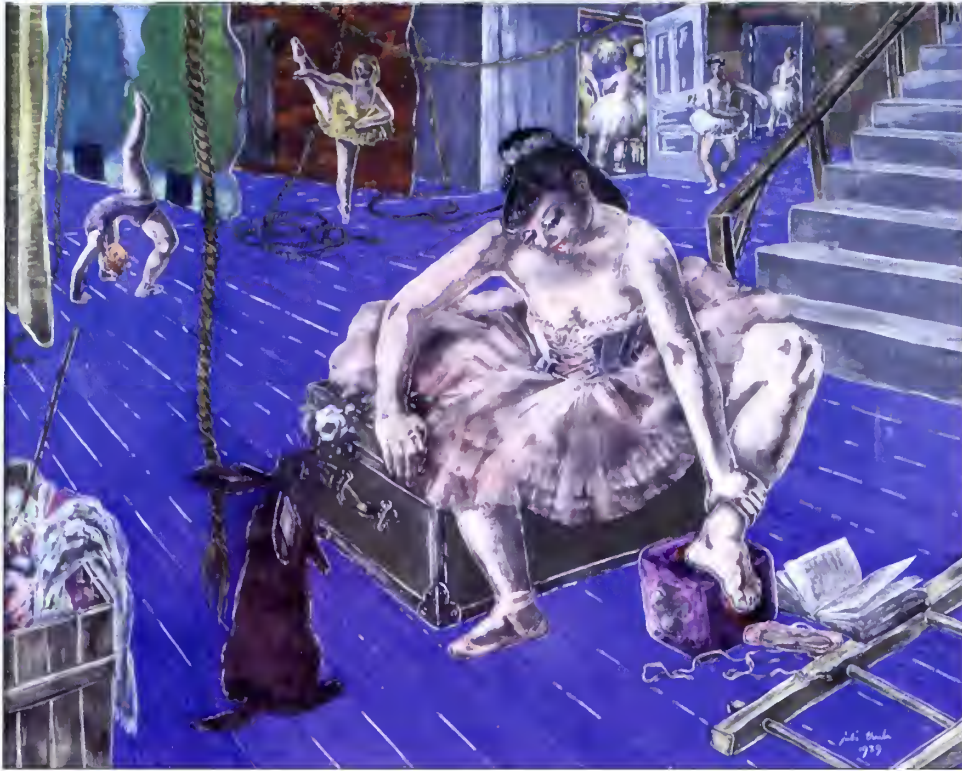


Tank Town, 1937. Walter Paul Robinson.

scenes as a grandmother sharing a letter over a picket fence or a group of hard-hatted miners walking under a dark sky.

Some communities are unaware of their Depression-era artwork, says Thompson, who has produced a video and guidebook on the subject. Nevertheless, she has documented such murals in about 70 locations.

So far, she also has documented seven Illinois communities whose art has been lost. Yet this loss has spurred



Bunny Backstage, 1939. Julia Thecla. Opaque watercolor with incising on gessoed cardboard.



South Chicago Series #2, 1937. Bernece Berkman. Opaque watercolor on paper.



Bridge Repairs, 1938. Louis Lozowick. Lithograph on paper.



Across the Bridge, 1940. Irene Gordon. Watercolor on paper.

neighborhood of 500 pieces from the Works Progress Administration period in storage, and the art center holds approximately 150. These numbers are significant, but pale in comparison to the sheer number of works completed in Illinois alone: more than 500 sculptures, more than 200 murals and nearly 5,000 easel paintings.

In an effort to continue where the federal government left off — and some might say to repair the historical damage done in the final days of the programs — the state museum has taken steps to ensure that WPA artwork won't disappear from the public eye again. Last month marked the end of the museum's first major gallery tour of its Depression-era art since the termination of the federal programs. The show has been on the road since 1997, traveling to Chicago, Lockport, Whittington, Springfield and Rockford.

The exhibition, "Work, People, Art," displayed roughly a quarter of the museum's holdings from the project, and provided Illinoisans from Chicago to southern Illinois an opportunity to see what Jim Zimmer, the administrator and curator of the museum's Lockport Gallery, calls "a part of our history."

That history's limitations were painfully obvious. Several of the works had a stark "Unknown" on the plate beside them where an artist's name should appear. This information void can be blamed partly on the haphazard termination of the Federal Art Project.

Yet there is plenty to learn from what's there. One existing work that typifies what the federal art programs attempted, but which certainly does

not typify the work overall, is Joseph Vavak's 1940 lithograph *Give*, which depicts a group of people panhandling. "It's a very challenging and a very small piece," says Zimmer. Though the lithograph is small in comparison to other works, it is consistently cited by patrons as one of the most powerful pieces on display. The figure in the foreground stares out of the frame at the viewer. One of her hands is extended, palm open and expectant. The other hand is gripping

The Illinois State Museum has taken steps to ensure that WPA artwork won't disappear from the public eye again.



City of Smiles, 1935. Fred Becker. Wood engraving on paper.

a cane. Two others, a man playing a violin and an elderly woman, fill what little space remains.

"They're in your face," Zimmer says, put there through a "severely cropped" technique used by Vavak to "shorten the distance between the viewer and the subject."

Other works include landscapes of cities, suburbs, farms, small towns, women dressing in the morning, women ironing, men working for the WPA, a game of cards, as well as departures into the then-new and controversial field of abstraction. The diversity of style and technique "testifies to the struggle American art was going through at the time" and was "a great step to setting up American identity," Zimmer says.

Another gallery showing is on the drawing board for late spring and summer.

As a result of this patchy history, Illinois' artistic identity may yet be at stake, and the viewer's distance from such pieces as Vavak's *Give* might be increasing rather than shrinking. Zimmer calls the Depression-era works the "adolescence of American art." And, as with any adolescence, the child sometimes has trouble getting attention, especially if it is locked away in a storage facility. Such are the persistent growing pains of American art. But there also is growing recognition of its achievements.

"Most communities appreciate their art and are very proud of it," says Thompson, and are "even getting back into designing post offices for artistic displays." And some still pride themselves not only on the historical importance of the federal projects, but on the continued practice of its ideal.

Take, as an example, the South Side art center. Eleanor Roosevelt dedicated the center in 1941 as a place for the display of work done through the Federal Art Project. The center was "a response to the time," to the African-American artists and to the community on Chicago's South Side,

says the center's managing director, Greg Spears. It's the only gallery established through WPA funds that still survives.

Since its opening, the center has remained intent, says Spears, on providing walls for African-American artists to exhibit in a world where most walls are still for white males. And while the center has not done as much conservation work on its holdings as staff might wish, it preserves the federal project's intent to bring communities together with art.

This also is the sentiment behind the state museum's efforts to reunite the public with its artistic history. One way to ensure the widest availability of its collection is through its online

Web site is receiving approximately 2 million hits per month. Many of those hits have come across the online "MuseumLink Illinois," which since 1997 has provided online learning to Illinois schools.

Zimmer keeps an eye out for information pertinent to the collection. And there's no end in sight in the effort to recover from mistakes made seven decades ago. Fortunately, those mistakes did not bury everything.

In the five shows he has curated with the WPA collection, Zimmer was reminded time and again of just how alive the hopes of the federal projects remain, despite what has been lost. The works consistently evoke what he calls an emotional response that

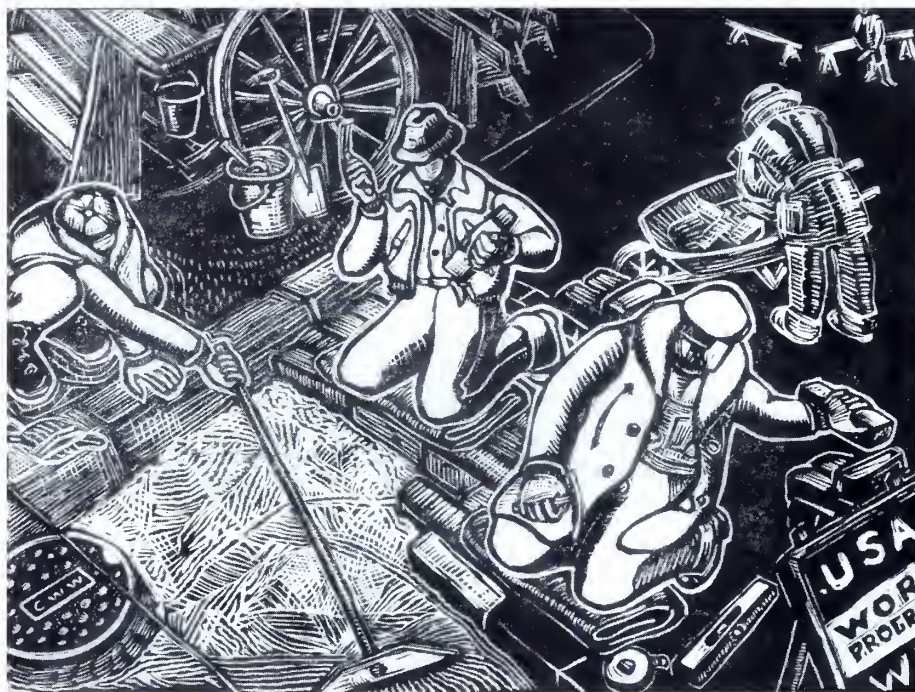
serves to bring that segment of American history to life.

Mary Thompson, who continues to collect stories, take photographs and catalog information, also has noted the bond people feel with the murals she has researched.

None embody that bond and the continued hopes for the federal projects more than the southern Illinois town of Chester's *Loading the Packet* by Fay Davis, which details the people and the daily activities of that

community in the heyday of river-boats. Men load sacks of grain, while families talk and children run by. In the course of gathering information about the work, Thompson heard that a postmaster in Chester was once given the following order: "If the building catches fire, forget the mail. Get that mural out." □

Ryan Reeves, formerly a staff member at Illinois Issues, teaches English at Springfield College in Illinois.



Brick Laying, 1935. Adrian Troy.

collections link, says Kent Smith, the museum's director of art.

Among other links are wpanmurals.com, which provides online viewing of murals from throughout the country. The project, still in the first quarter of its two-year plan, promises to become a databank including images from Depression-era holdings.

Some of the state's holdings have already made their way into the electronic gallery. And the new venue is getting some attention. The museum's

Queen of the Blues

For more than 40 years, Koko Taylor has nurtured and preserved the distinctive Chicago sound. And she's among the last to have lived what she sings

by Aaron Chambers
Photographs by Jennine Craven

Koko Taylor could have entered the stage on a chariot. After all, she is the Queen of the Blues. She shimmered against the lights in a shaggy silver jacket, hat and sleek pants to match. With a trademark shuffle, she followed the beat of her five-piece band to the front. Right and right. Left and left.

Then she sang. Taylor's voice, her most distinctive quality, rumbled across the floor of the 250-seat venue like a low-pitched growl: "Hey everybody, let's have some fun. You only live once, and when you're dead you're done."

"Let the good times roll."

That's just what Taylor has been doing for more than 40 years. Since the 1950s, she has nurtured and preserved the distinctive Chicago blues sound — gritty yet tight — onstage and in the recording studio. And she continues to express the musical traditions of a particular time and place. She's among the last of the blues artists to have lived what she sings.

"She picked cotton. She was a share-cropper," says Bruce Iglauer, founder and president of Chicago-based Alligator Records, Taylor's label since 1975. "She did all of those cliché blues things that the younger generation doesn't do because they were born in the city, or because times have changed. And even though things aren't great for black people, they aren't as exploited as they used to be. So she brings a level of rootedness and southern-based intensity



Koko Taylor

to her music."

As some in the music business like to say, Taylor "lives the blues." She and other black artists, including Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon and Howlin' Wolf, moved to the city from southern states, transplanting the raw sounds of the Mississippi Delta to Chicago's thriving electric blues scene. That means she was among the blues artists who helped define the sound that evolved in the years following World War II.

But she also has distinguished herself as a female blues belter in the tradition

of such legends as Bessie Smith, Big Mama Thornton and Memphis Minnie.

And her career has been characterized by her determination to succeed in a male-dominated field. "By being a woman, I kinda stand out," she says. "They don't fit me in. I have to fit myself in. I don't work harder. I work just as hard. And I have to work in a way to let the men know, 'Hey, I'm not a man. I'm a woman, and I'm just as good a woman as you are a man.'"

"I must have been right. I'm going places the men ain't going. I'm in Ohio tonight. And there are a lot of them back in Chicago that ain't going further than Chicago. I was in West Virginia last night. They weren't there."

Taylor belted out 10 more songs during that stop at Gilly's, a nightclub in Dayton. And she delivered each song, barnburner on down, with characteristic intensity. For a woman who says she's 74, that performance is even more remarkable.

Yet singing the blues is simply what Taylor does. "I'm back home," she said after the first song. "This is home for me." She doesn't live in Dayton, and she never has; she has lived most of her adult life in Chicago or its suburbs. She was referring to the stage. And these days, her stage could be anywhere in the country.

Despite her age, and a recent heart attack, Taylor is running strong. She cut her schedule from a grueling 200 shows



a year, but remains a constant presence on the touring circuit. The night before the show in Dayton, she performed in Huntington, W.Va. A few days later, it was Bloomington, Ind. Along the way, she prepared material for another album.

"This is my life. If this was taken away from me, I wouldn't be no more good here on earth," she said in an interview before the show. "I'll retire when God says I ain't able to go no more, ain't able to do nothing no more. Then I'll stay at home with my grandkids. But until then, I'll be right out here working and making people all over the world happy with my music. It makes me happy."

Since she began singing in clubs on Chicago's South Side, Taylor has recorded 10 albums and won a host of awards. Just this year, the Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation, a statewide advocacy group, honored Taylor with its Arts Legend Award for having "significantly advanced the artistic and cultural lives of the people of Illinois."

In 1993, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley honored her with a "Legend of the Year" award and declared "Koko Taylor Day" throughout the city. *Chicago Magazine* named her "Chicagoan of the Year" in 1999. The Memphis-based Blues Foundation inducted her into its Blues Hall of Fame in 1999. In 1984, she won a Grammy Award for her part in a blues compilation album. Several of her

albums have received Grammy nominations. She also has won 22 prestigious W.C. Handy Awards for blues excellence. And *Rolling Stone* has called her "the great female blues singer of her generation," a significant assessment from the venerable rock and roll magazine.

Though a great influence on modern rock and roll, blues often is regarded as a historical relic. As Chicago blues great Lonnie Brooks notes, musicians often have used blues as a stepping stone to rock and roll and other types of music. This includes Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones.

But Taylor "doesn't mind" singing the blues, says Brooks, who has known Taylor since he moved to Chicago from Texas in 1959. "She loves the blues and she lives it."

And she stuck with it.

Taylor was raised on a sharecropper's farm just outside of Memphis, where her family picked cotton. Born Cora Walton, she earned her lifelong nickname for her love of chocolate.

She sang gospel in a local Baptist church. And despite her father's wish that she sing only gospel, she sang blues on the farm while two of her brothers accompanied her with makeshift instruments. One played a guitar strung with bailing wire and another played a fife made out of a corncob. They tried to emulate artists they heard on radio shows hosted by B.B. King and Rufus Thomas.

She moved to Chicago in 1953 with

her boyfriend and future husband, Robert Taylor, who was looking for work. "I said to him, 'If you're going to Chicago, I'm going too. You ain't leaving me,'" she said. "So I went to Chicago with him." Robert Taylor found a job at a packing company while she worked as a maid for a "rich white family" in a posh North Shore suburb.

In their free time, Taylor and her husband, "Pop" as she called him, would frequent blues clubs on the city's South Side. Soon, she was sitting in with various bands.

"If you listen to Koko, you would never doubt that she was a Chicago blues singer," Iglauer says. "The Chicago blues are the grittiest, most intense, forceful styles of blues and that's totally what Koko is about. She's absolutely in your face as a singer."

It was her voice that commanded attention. Dixon, the late Chicago blues musician, songwriter and producer, approached her. "He said this is what the world needs today — a woman with your voice to sing the blues, because we've got plenty of men out here but no women."

Dixon became Taylor's mentor. He got her a recording contract at Chess Records in Chicago and produced several of her singles, including her 1965 hit *Wang Dang Doodle*. That song, which sold more than one million copies, firmly established her as a blues artist.

Taylor, who remarried after Robert



died, continues to perform the song at every show. "The meaning of *Wang Dang Doodle* is that we're going out tomorrow night and we're going to have a good time," she said. "We're going to 'romp and tromp.' That could mean we're going to dance, we're going to holler, we're going to smoke, we're going to drink some good whiskey, get drunk, and it's going to go all night."

Shortly after Taylor recorded the hit though, Chess Records folded and Taylor lost her label. That's when she met Iglauer.

He was just starting his label, and was reluctant to support her. He previously had worked with guitarists, and was comfortable speaking their language, but was unsure whether he could communicate with a vocalist. Moreover, he was producing only one album a year and, as he puts it, could not afford a failure.

But Taylor's talent — and persistence — impressed Iglauer, and he signed her in 1975. He has since produced or co-produced the eight albums she recorded with Alligator, and she's one of the label's top-selling acts.

While Taylor was working to revive her career after Chess, the dynamics of the blues market were changing. In the late 1960s, that market in Chicago was driven by a black audience. But by the early 1970s, the industry began to shift. Whites were embracing the blues. And the music was becoming less fashionable among blacks. The blues became more popular on the city's white-domi-

nated North Side, while performances faded from many of the clubs in black neighborhoods on the South Side.

Iglauer says blues artists who remained popular among blacks, including Little Milton and Willie Clayton, lack the grit associated with Chicago blues. The hard edges have been sanded. "A lot of what black people call blues, we might call old-fashioned soul music," he says. "It's music with stories and good grooves."

Iglauer says these days he markets his blues albums to an almost exclusively white audience. He says blacks in his audience are mostly older and working-class.

Taylor suspects blacks are turned off by blues' close resemblance to slave songs, from which blues music descended. She estimates that nowadays 90 percent of the people who attend her performances are white.

"A lot of the black people are ashamed of the blues music because it's a reminder of being black," she says. "It's a reminder of slavery."

"But the white people think it's great. And I think it's great too. I don't look at it as a reminder because I don't have to sing to be reminded of where I started and where I come from. I just know I'm enjoying what I'm doing. I enjoy making the people happy with what I'm doing."

Taylor was one of the first South Side blues artists to find an audience at such North Side clubs as Kingston Mines in the early 1970s.

The successful blues artist must be a master storyteller. And Taylor is no exception. Her songs, which detail love as well as heartache, are strong on imagery. In her song *I'm a Woman*, for example, she asserts, "I can make love to a crocodile."

She wrote the lyrics in response to *Mannish Boy*, a blues classic performed by Muddy Waters. This is the quintessential macho song, where the protagonist gets what he wants because he's a "full grown man."

Taylor kept the tune but changed the words. "He said he's a man. And every word he said I had to stop and think about what can I be that's even stronger, or something that he didn't do."

During the interview in her Dayton hotel room, Taylor produced a song she's composing and that she hopes will be a commercial success on a par with *Wang Dang Doodle*.

She read from her notes, "I've been to Nashville. I've been to L.A. I've been to Sweden and I've been to Norway. I've been to Paris. I've been to Rome. But no matter where I go, ain't no place like home."

At the show later that night, Taylor capped her set with *Wang Dang Doodle*. Then she closed with these remarks: "Some people are ashamed to say they came from the South. Some people are ashamed to say they picked cotton. That's what I did. That's what I did, and I ain't doing it now." □

PEOPLE

Shifts at the top

Gov.-elect Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, named former GOP Gov. **James Thompson** and **Margaret Blackshere**, president of the Illinois AFL-CIO, as co-chairs of his 26-member transition team. Vice-chairs are U.S. Rep. **Luis Gutierrez** of Chicago, state Rep. **Jay Hoffman** of Collinsville, former Attorney General **Roland Burris** and Springfield attorney **Mary Lee Leahy** — all Democrats. Democratic political strategist **David Wilhelm** is team director and state Sen. **Carol Ronen**, a Chicago Democrat, is deputy director.

Pam McDonough stepped down as director of the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs to become chairman of the local panel of the Illinois Labor Relations Board. **Joseph Hannon**, managing director of the department's Illinois Trade Office, was appointed acting director.

For more news, see *Illinois Issues Online* at <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>.

ARTISTS WHO SOAR

The work of 42 Illinois artists with developmental disabilities is on display through December 8 at the Harold Washington Library Center at 400 State St. in Chicago. It's the first statewide juried art exhibit for artists with such disabilities as Down syndrome, mental retardation, autism or sensory impairments.

The exhibition, *Spirits That Soar*, is composed of acrylics, oils, etchings and mixed media pieces by artists from 15 Illinois cities.

"I think it's really great work," says Jeff Cory, executive director of Chicago's Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art and one of the exhibit's jurors. Many of the artists' works have appeared in other exhibitions.

Nancy Feldman, of Esperanza Community Services, a private, nonprofit agency in Chicago, put together the show. With a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, she started work three years ago by reaching out to organizations across the state that help people with developmental disabilities.

BIT

Nicholas Bua

Twenty-three years ago he issued the ruling that shook the Chicago political machine to its core. U.S. District Judge Nicholas Bua died November 1 in a hospital in his hometown of Melrose Park. He was 77.

In 1979, Judge Bua ruled that the city of Chicago's patronage practices violated civil and voting rights. Four years later, he entered a consent judgment that effectively blocked the city and county from hiring most employees for political reasons. Known as the Shakman decree, named for attorney Michael Shakman who filed the lawsuit, Bua's ruling predated another case that successfully challenged political patronage at the state level.

The decree was back in the news early this year when Chicago Mayor Richard Daley argued the city could be run more effectively with more exemptions. In September 2001, the U.S. District Court ruled that the city had violated the decree nearly 1,800 times over a period of years.

"The Shakman decree was a landmark case," says Dick Simpson, a Chicago alderman from 1971 to 1979 and now a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "It undermines machine politics by both the Republicans in the suburbs and downstate and the Democrats in Chicago and Cook County."

Judge Bua, the son of Italian immigrants, grew up in Chicago. His first elective office was village court judge in Melrose Park in 1963. He was elected to the Illinois Appellate Court in 1976. A year later, President Jimmy Carter nominated him for the U.S. District Court for the Northern District, where he served until his retirement in 1991.

"Our court has never had a better colleague," says Chief District Court Judge Charles Kocoras.

They're in there.

Talking about something.

But sometimes, talking isn't the problem.

It's understanding that's difficult.

For in-depth discussion and analysis of news at the Statehouse and across Illinois, turn to the public affairs programming on WSEC-TV, **LAWMAKERS** with Mark McDonald and **CapitolView** with Ben Kinningham.

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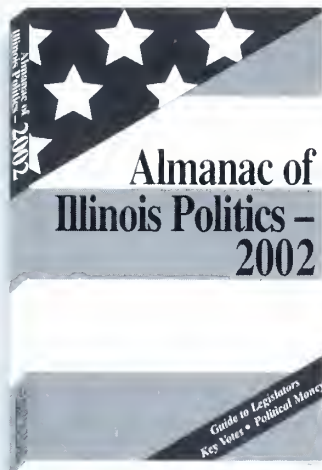
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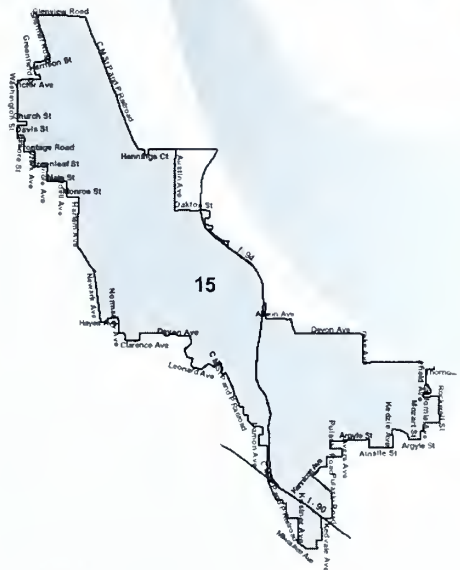
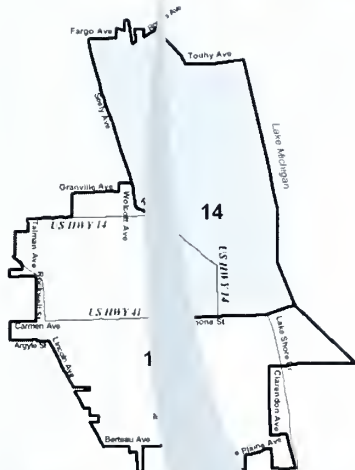
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Jobs:

A second chance for released prisoners

In your September 2002 issue, the article "Labor con" (see page 9) caught my attention, and I hope that it caught others' as well, for it's a very disappointing topic. [Rodd] Whelpley discussed how ex-convicts can't get employed after being released from prison.

Employers don't take into consideration any job training or skills that the convicts learned while in prison, even if they became certified. It appears that society has forgotten that the main purpose of the prison system is to rehabilitate the person back into society.

By offering ex-convicts the opportunity of a fresh start, they once more become productive members of

society. How else can they do that without a job?

If they can't make a decent living in the world, the only option is to return to prison and live off our tax money (talk about a waste of tax money). No wonder the recidivism rate is so high! People need to stop being paranoid; not everyone will be released. Behaviors are learned, even good ones, so there is a great chance a person will change.

Organizations like the Safer Foundation are designed to help ex-convicts with such issues, but there's still a demand for more support. Just remember, we aren't supporting their reasons for imprisonment; what we are supporting is their desire to show their transformations and willingness to have a fresh start.

*Monica Escatel
 Round Lake*

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It's time for Illinois' political artists to dig out their brushes and get to work again

by Robert Davis

Chicago has a rightful reputation as an art capital. There's the Art Institute, of course. And the city's historic architecture is a masterpiece against the canvas of the sky. Then, there's Chicago's equally deserved reputation as a city where the Art of the Deal has been much-refined.

With a new Democratic governor and a new Democratic-controlled state legislature about to be installed, it's time for Illinois' political artists to dig out their brushes and get to work again.

And Chicago Mayor Richard Daley says he has a creative idea to help cure his considerable financial woes — problems shared by most every governing body that relies on the public's pocketbook. Facing his own election early next year, Daley proposed a 2003 budget that calls for no new taxes and a variety of belt-tightening measures. But the backdrop is his suggestion that it might just be time to open Chicago to casino gambling.

Daley has stood firmly on both sides of this issue over the years. As a former Cook County state's attorney, he once condemned legalized gambling as an irresistible lure to organized crime. But when the state authorized the bizarre concept of riverboat gambling for economically depressed cities, he changed his mind. Seeing millions of dollars — many from the wallets of Chicagoans — streaming to nearby casinos in Joliet, Aurora, Elgin and northern Indiana, Daley floated the equally bizarre idea of building a downtown complex featuring

a family theme park anchored by four big casinos. At the time, Daley was locked in a continuing feud with then-Gov. Jim Edgar, and his Disney With Dice scheme never got off, or into, the ground.

Now, however, Daley is back with a twist. Rather than simply allowing the city of Chicago to become home to an established gambling company holding one of the state's 10 casino licenses, Daley wants the city to get the license. Rather than just getting a share of the lucrative profits, Daley has suggested that city employees slip on the sleeve garters and sequined vests, cutting out middlemen from Las Vegas, Atlantic City or the various Native-American tribes that operate gambling salons elsewhere.

In fact, he has hinted, the big old vacant U.S. Post Office building that straddles the Eisenhower Expressway just yards from downtown Chicago would be a great place to open a casino.

Both major candidates for governor expressed instant caution about adding the title Pit Boss to Daley's name and the job description of croupier to the city's employment rolls. But neither ruled it out, falling back on the political option of promising to "look at it."

Rod Blagojevich, especially, was noncommittal, saying the idea would need study. Yet his father-in-law, Chicago Ald. Richard Mell, is a master of the Art of the Deal, and, in fact, once financed his 33rd Ward political organization with bingo games.

And who knows how much money

government-sanctioned gambling could produce. Gambling is addictive, not just to gamblers, but to governments that find themselves recipients of the largesse it can bring. By last year, state-sanctioned casino gambling was generating nearly \$555 million in revenues. And that was just the state's share of the take turned over by private firms. If the city were the license owner, that sum would increase many times over. That's a beautiful buffet for a cash-starved government.

And so, as the new regime settles into office, the Art of the Deal will take on new intensity. Politicians get elected by making big promises, but, in the post-September 11 economy, the money just isn't there to keep them. Unless a new revenue source can be found.

Gambling seems to be a recession-proof business, and a lot of doubts about the ethics of government getting directly involved in the so-called vice business can be erased by dreams of quick-fix money. Cigarettes and liquor have been tolerated for decades because of the dollars they produce in fees and taxes.

The philosophical question of whether government should get involved in gambling was pretty much settled when the first Lottery ticket was sold 28 years ago. The only remaining question these days is who gets to deal. □

Robert Davis, who covered government and politics for the Chicago Tribune for more than 30 years, teaches journalism at Columbia College Chicago.

Mike Morsch



I should have consulted *The Thinker* during the planning stages for Family Fine Arts Day

by Mike Morsch

We have always tried to provide our children with opportunities to be exposed to the fine arts. Unfortunately, our family usually consults the *Book of Stooges* for all things cultural, of which I am immensely proud because I live in a house full of women.

Still, this did not prevent us from taking a one-time family outing to the Museum of Art and to the Rodin Museum, both in Philadelphia. Among other things, we would see all types of art, as well as Rodin's famous sculpture, *The Thinker*.

It soon became apparent that I should have consulted *The Thinker* during the planning stages for Family Fine Arts Day. He might have thought up a better game plan.

We received an early sign of discord when Eldest Daughter decided she would rather spend a day with her nose in a geometry book than go to a museum. While on the surface this might seem like a teenager's ploy to avoid spending a day being annoyed by her uncool parents and her little sister, it was not, because she is one of four people on the planet who actually likes geometry. Besides, according to us, we are not uncool.

Conversely, the outing was an easy sell to Youngest Daughter, who can be talked into anything attached to the promise of an N'SYNC compact disc.

Now, lest you think our children are

But our family will not be dissuaded. We will continue to invade the likes of the museum, the symphony, the ballet and the theater, where we will promptly try to entice the crowd into doing the wave.

lacking in artistic graces, let me state up front that the youngest is a singer, the oldest can produce a piece of artwork good enough to hang in my office and both are dancers. Not only that, they are both smart, beautiful and look like their mother, for which everyone is thankful, especially me. Besides, neither can hit a curveball, and we were forced to steer them toward other interests.

So our museum excursion group was reduced to three family members and two friends from Illinois. The Museum of Art is housed in a huge, palatial, gold-plated building that can be seen from the highway leading into Philadelphia. It was also the backdrop for a famous scene in the film *Rocky*,

which was enough to impress me right there.

Unfortunately, we were less inspired inside the museum. Youngest Daughter did find a room that housed some kind of papier-maché display that she thought could have been produced by any of her elementary school cohorts. Across the room, on the wall, was another display, the meaning of which escaped me. It was a plain kitchen sink. Protruding from the wall above the sink were two female legs, hanging down into the basin.

"Oh Dad, that's gross," said my daughter.

"What's gross?" I countered.

"Those legs on the wall. They have hair on them. I think I'm gonna throw up," she said.

"Well, then step over near the papier-maché display and maybe nobody will notice," I said.

Meanwhile, my wife had wandered into a room that housed a large canvas, approximately 25 feet high and about 10 feet wide. The vertical painting was half orange, half black. Nothing else.

"Holy cow, I could have done that," my wife said to nobody in particular after studying the piece for several moments. Those who know my wife know that that's not exactly what she said during her critique, but decorum forces me to paraphrase her in this instance. Not only that, my wife has a range of volume settings that begins

progressively louder. This time it was set to "Informs the Whole City."

"Well, harumpfffff!" said one woman as she turned and stomped out of the room. My wife took this to mean that the woman agreed with her critique on the artwork. I let her think that because I've been married a long time and have learned that sleeping in the garage is not much fun at all.

While it appeared that wife and daughter had each found something to entertain them, I still was searching for my niche in the museum. I wandered into the areas that contained the paintings, and discovered some original work by Van Gogh and Monet, which I initially thought might have been the Cardinals double-play combination in the 1940s. That turned out to be wrong, the tip-off being that those guys had all their ears.

Thus I was reduced to looking at the paintings, thoughtfully rubbing my chin, and saying "hmmmm" and "ahhhhhh" a lot.

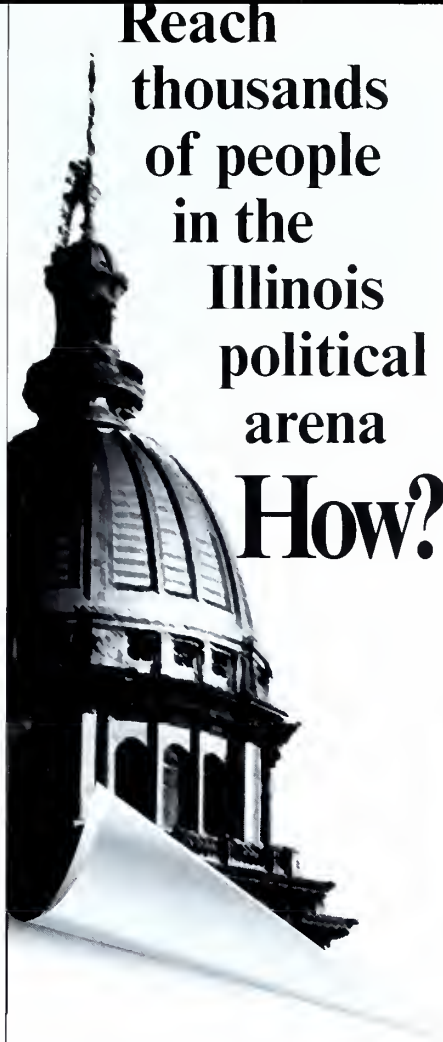
I eventually worked my way into the modern/abstract art area. This was slightly more interesting, if for no other reason than it raised several questions about the decision-making process involved in selecting which art will be displayed in the museum.

It was in this area where I finally found a piece of art I could relate to: a wall with a urinal. It took me several moments to figure out that I hadn't wandered into the men's room.

There you have it, the sum total of *The Hillbillies Go to the Big City Art Museum*: daughter was ill, wife was ill-advised and I was ill-informed. That certainly should put us at the top of the invitation list for the museum's next black-tie fundraiser.

But our family will not be dissuaded. We will continue to invade the likes of the museum, the symphony, the ballet and the theater, where we will promptly try to entice the crowd into doing the wave. □

Mike Morsch can be reached by telephone at 217-206-6521 or through e-mail at morsch.unichael@uis.edu.



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The mythic Greek hero might have met his match this campaign season

by Charles N. Wheeler III

As one of his 12 labors, Hercules had to clean out the Aegean stables, a task he completed without dirtying his hands by diverting two rivers through the vast and noisome barnyard.

But the mythic Greek hero might have met his match had he tried to clean up the mess from the political campaigns that mercifully ended here last month, even with the Mississippi and Ohio rivers at his disposal.

While Illinois politicians seemed to sink to new lows in negative campaigning, they also reached new highs — close to \$40 million in the governor's race alone — in raising the dollars to pay for all the mud-slinging. Yet when the last character-assassinating TV spot ended and the last prevaricating brochure hit the final mailbox, Illinois citizens voted pretty much the way everyone expected, long before all that money was spent to change their minds. Consider the results:

- U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, a Democrat, cruised to re-election over state Rep. Jim Durkin, a Republican from Westchester, who had scant help from national GOP operatives.
- Democratic U.S. Rep. Rod Blagojevich easily won the governorship over Republican Attorney General Jim Ryan, as polls expected all campaign season.
- State Sen. Lisa Madigan, a Chicago Democrat, was elected attorney general by almost 108,000 votes over DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett,

Yet when the last character-assassinating TV spot ended and the last prevaricating brochure hit the final mailbox, Illinois citizens voted pretty much the way everyone expected, long before all that money was spent to change their minds.

again as most polls predicted for months.

- Secretary of State Jesse White, Comptroller Daniel Hynes and Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka all won new terms handily, as incumbents in lower-level statewide offices have done for years.

- Ten Republicans and nine Democrats were elected to the U.S. House, just as party powerbrokers in Washington, D.C., planned when they drew new districts after the 2000 census, which cost Illinois a seat.

The only potential glitch was the refusal of U.S. Rep. David Phelps to accept the sacrificial role assigned him; the Eldorado Democrat fought gamely, but lost to U.S. Rep. John Shimkus of

Collinsville by some 23,000 votes.

- Democrats won majorities in the legislature, a foregone conclusion after the party won the right to draw new Senate and House districts some 14 months ago.

Voters rewrote the script in a couple of races, ousting favored incumbent Sens. Laura Kent Donahue, a Quincy Republican, and William O'Daniel, a Mount Vernon Democrat.

Also losing was Sen. William Shaw, a Dolton Democrat, edged by the Rev. James Meeks of Chicago in the South Side-south suburban 15th District (see *Illinois Issues*, September, page 39). Meeks, running under the banner of the "Honesty and Integrity Party" is the first third-party candidate elected to the state Senate in 88 years.

In another first, Frank Aguilar, a Cicero town administrator, triumphed in the west suburban, 72-percent Hispanic 24th House District, becoming the only Republican to win in a minority district since three-member districts were eliminated in 1980.

Elsewhere in legislative races, things ran pretty much to form and to Democratic wishes. As a result, Democrats will hold margins of 33 to 26 in the Senate (Meeks will align himself with Democrats) and 66 to 52 in the House. With Blagojevich as governor, the party will have unfettered control over — and responsibility for — state government for the next two years.

The specter of Democratic control

resulting in a state run by the Chicago political machine interests was among the silliest red herrings Jim Ryan and his GOP sidekicks dredged up in a relentlessly negative campaign. A refresher course in Politics 101 and a quick glance at election results belies the claim.

Presumably, Democrats would like to stay in office, and so will try to please the folks who elected them. Blagojevich received about 548,000 votes from Chicagoans, less than a third of his 1.8 million total. His abortion-rights stance helped him pull 656,000 suburban votes, while union backing aided in garnering 638,000 votes in the state's 96 downstate counties. Given the numbers, logic dictates Blagojevich won't shortchange either the suburbs or downstate.

Bad-mouthing Chicago, meanwhile, may have cost Ryan dearly; he took less than 19 percent of the city vote, the worst Chicago showing by a GOP gubernatorial candidate in at least 40 years. In contrast, Gov. George Ryan won almost a third of the Chicago vote in 1998. Jim Ryan also ran some 12

The specter of Democratic control resulting in a state run by the Chicago political machine was among the silliest red herrings Jim Ryan and his GOP sidekicks dredged up.

points behind the incumbent governor in the suburbs, losing suburban Cook by more than 50,000 votes.

Suburban and downstate voters also gave Democrats their legislative majorities. Of 33 incoming Senate Democrats, only 16 are from Chicago. Nine are suburbanites and eight from downstate. The regional diversity is more pronounced in the House, where Chicagoans will account for just 30 of the 66 Democrats. Sixteen are from the suburbs; the other 20 are downstaters. House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate Democratic Leader Emil Jones

Jr. aren't likely to pursue a pro-Chicago agenda and risk the re-election chances of the suburban and downstate Democrats who provide their majorities.

Of course, Republicans weren't alone in ignoring the facts to score cheap points. Blagojevich hammered Ryan incessantly for not investigating the license-for-bribes scandal, while Ryan insisted he deferred to federal prosecutors. In reality, asking the attorney general to conduct a criminal investigation is like calling the dentist to get new contact lenses. With narrow exceptions, the office practices civil, not criminal, law.

That's a fact that Birkett — who depicted the job as a state's attorney on steroids — apparently still doesn't get: in a concession call to Madigan, Birkett told her, "Lisa, you're a prosecutor now." No, she isn't. She is set to become the state's first female attorney general, ready to continue the ombudsman role crafted by a long line of predecessors. □

Charles N. Wheeler III is director of the Public Affairs Reporting Program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

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